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Teacher agency within the context of formative teacher assessment: an in-depth analysis

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ABSTRACT

Teachers' agency has an effect on their own learning process at the workplace. In this study we explored the extent to which teachers participating in a formative teacher assessment procedure developed a sense of agency. We investigated not only whether teachers participating in a such an assessment procedure experienced agency and thus felt in control of the learning process and able to pursue their learning objectives, but also whether agency was visible, by looking at decision-making in real time: did teachers take an active role in their own assessment, especially regarding the learning objectives to be pursued, during the assessment meetings? We found that teachers experienced a high level of agency while participating in the assessment procedure, but did not consistently show this during the assessment procedure.

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Introduction

Teachers may learn in their workplace through either participation in everyday work or explicitly organised learning activities by the school organisation. In both cases, workplace learning experiences represent an interaction between the social practice of the workplace and individuals' agency (Billett 2004). An example of an intentionally organised work place learning activity is formative assessment, which is a promising tool for stimulating teacher learning and development (Darling-Hammond and Snyder 2000). Also, it is frequently assumed that such assessment is only useful when those being assessed (in this case, teachers) are *actively* involved in the assessment process and thus share with their assessors not only responsibility but also control (Segers 2003). Active involvement is critical for learning and thus for the professional development of teachers (Borko, Jacobs, and Koellner 2010). Put like this, active involvement might be considered a precondition for learning.

In this study we used formative assessment – also called “assessment for learning” (Birenbaum 2011; Ruiz-Primo 2011) – to help teachers plan their learning, identify their strengths and weaknesses, formulate target areas for remedial action and develop the skills needed to further improve their teaching practices (Topping 2009). Learning also occurs

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when existing knowledge is used in a new context or in new combinations. This involves both explicit and tacit knowledge (Eraut 2000).

In a position paper presented at a conference on Assessment for learning, assessment for learning is defined as "... part of everyday practice by students, teachers and peers that seeks, reflects upon and responds to information from dialogue, demonstration and observation in ways that enhance ongoing learning" (AFL 2009). The role of reflection can be threefold: (a) to understand and give meaning to a situation; (b) to set learning goals (cf. Ruiz-Primo 2011); and (c) to support learners' abilities to reason about and reflect upon their own learning (see for instance Kuhn 1999).

Agency

The concept of agency is relevant for both workplace learning and formative assessment; not only because of the interaction between individuals' agency and the social context of the workplace, but also because individuals' agency determines how they engage in the process of learning (Billett 2004).

The concept of agency has been approached in different ways, such as social, cultural or life course, and identity perspectives (see Eteläpelto et al. (2013) for a literature review). In the literature on the professional development of teachers, for example, agency has been described as a vehicle for actively making occupational choices that correspond to personal considerations (Vähäsantanen et al. 2008).

In the literature several definitions of agency can be found (see Edwards (2015) for a short overview). Although the definitions are different, they have some elements in common. Agency is about intentionally making things happen, as opposed to simply letting them happen. Agency is about control and power, and can manifest itself as the extent to which people *perceive* themselves as being in control of their own actions (Metcalf and Greene 2007) and the extent to which people *take initiative* in the pursuit of their goals (Day et al. 2007, 111). The latter form constitutes the difference with the concept of *ownership*, which is defined as a mental or psychological state of feeling the owner of an issue, for example an innovation, which develops through the teacher's mental and/or physical investment in it (Ketelaar et al. 2012). When an issue is fully owned, there is motivation for individual actions (Pratt and Dutton 2000), for example to *undertake learning activities* aimed at eliciting a shift in cognition, behaviour or both (Fishman et al. 2003; Meirink, Meijer, and Verloop 2007; Putnam and Borko 2000). Besides taking initiatives, another difference with ownership is that agency is not only personal, but there is an interaction or a form of interplay between the person and social practice or culture (Edwards 2015), for example at the workplace.

As mentioned above, agency is important for learning. We would like to explore the nature of agency in a learning context ideally suited for agency, namely negotiated assessment (Gosling 2000). This is a formative assessment procedure characterised by extensive involvement of participants in their own assessment and the exchange of views between the assessee and the assessor (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013). In negotiated assessment control is shared between assessor and learner via negotiating learning objectives and activities during the assessment process (Boud, Cohen, and Sampson 1999). In negotiated assessment, the power relations between assessor and assessee are generally on a more equal footing than in other forms of assessment (Gosling 2000), although in the context of assessment power issues are always present (Boud, Cohen, and Sampson 1999). Characteristics of a more

equal relationship in assessments are open communication and mutual respect (Anderson, Boud, and Sampson 1996). A negotiated assessment meeting is typically also a reflective dialogue intended to foster learning (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2015). For productive reflective dialogues Schön's (1983) notions of reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action are important. Hatton and Smith (1995) conceptualise reflection-on-action as the capacity to provide rationales for the actions undertaken, preferably by investigating alternative perspectives, claims and pathways towards a solution, and at the same time locating any analysis of an action within wider socio-historical, political-moral and cultural contexts. Reflection-in-action is conceptualised as the capacity to apply each of these reflection types to situations as they actually occur. Finally, reflective processes are expected to support teachers in improving their teaching practices and developing the capacity to direct their own development (Schön 1983). In order to promote reflective dialogues that foster teachers' learning and development, in negotiated assessment processes those being assessed are encouraged to take the initiative in their own learning, also by negotiating the interpretation of feedback provided (Anderson, Boud, and Sampson 1996; Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013). The feedback provided should pertain to specific learning objectives and actions, on the one hand, and aim at modifying thinking or behaviour for purposes of learning on the other (Shute 2008). It should also be recognised that feedback is aimed at reducing a discrepancy observed between the current situation (e.g. knowledge, performance) and a desired situation (Hattie and Timperley 2007; Ramaprasad 1983). According to Wiliam (2011), possible responses to feedback include a change of behaviour, a change of goal, goal abandonment or rejection of the feedback.

The opportunities to negotiate the feedback provided on learning objectives and performance demand more equal power relations between teachers and their assessors, and are expected to stimulate active involvement and initiative by teachers themselves during negotiated assessment procedures (Anderson, Boud, and Sampson 1996). All this may promote teachers' sense of agency and abilities to reflect upon their own functioning and steer their own learning processes.

In a previous study about negotiated assessment, some of the participating teachers felt that participating in the negotiated assessment procedure really made them take the initiative for the pursuit of their goals "...you force yourself to really take action." (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013). However, they were not clear about the *extent* of learner agency manifested during the negotiated assessment procedure, or the characteristics of the interactions responsible for this. To our knowledge, no other empirical research evidence is available as yet, so that in our study we focused on the manifestation of teachers' agency.

In recent literature, the common research methods in studies about agency are mixed methods, with interviews as primary resources. Sometimes observations and document analysis are used to provide a background for the interviews. As far as we know, none of these methods concerned teachers' decision-making in real time. Therefore, in our study we explored not only whether teachers participating in a formative negotiated assessment procedure experienced agency and thus felt in control of the learning process and able to pursue their learning objectives, but also investigated if agency was visible by looking at decision-making in real time: did teachers take an active role in their own assessment, especially concerning the learning objectives to be pursued, during the assessment meetings?

For this purpose, we conducted an in-depth case study with three teachers in order to answer the following two research questions.

- (1) To what extent did teachers experience a sense of agency during participation in a negotiated assessment procedure?
- (2) To what extent was agency visible in the interactions between the assessor and the teacher during the negotiated assessment meetings and process (i.e. the teachers formulate their own learning objectives, engage in learning activities and take the initiative during the assessment and learning process)?

Method

Context

In this study we followed a two-year negotiated assessment trajectory for teachers of nursing, starting in the spring of 2009 and ending in the spring of 2011. The focus of the assessment procedure was on enhancing teachers' coaching skills aimed at improving reflection in their nursing students of 16 years and older. Reflection has become the corner stone of nursing professionalism (Cotton 2001; Newell 1992) and, like many institutes of education in the health profession (Mann, Gordon, and MacLeod 2009), nursing education institutes pay much attention to educating students in reflection skills. However, there is little to guide teachers in understanding and developing reflective skills among students (Mann, Gordon, and MacLeod 2009).

Research design

The choice of a case study was made for several reasons. First, a case study is useful in an in-depth study into unexplored terrain (Yin 2009). Negotiated assessment for teacher learning is an example of such unexplored terrain and we wanted to contribute to the knowledge of this phenomenon. We wanted to know how teachers *experience* agency in a negotiated assessment procedure. Second, we assumed that during the assessment meetings agency might become *visible* in the interactions between assessee and assessor. The case study method allows a researcher to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, and to cast light on a situation in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear, single set of outcomes (Yin 2009).

A case study method is divided into several phases, such as selecting the cases, conducting the case studies, writing individual case reports, drawing cross-case conclusions, and modifying theory and/or developing policy implications (Yin 2009). To enhance validity and triangulation (Yin 2009), we used multiple cases: three dyads of teachers and assessors and three assessments meetings of each dyad. From the previous study (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013), we knew what changes had occurred in the teachers' learning objectives over the two-year assessment trajectory. For our in-depth analysis we therefore decided to examine a set of teacher-assessor pairs showing different patterns of change in specifically the learning objectives. We selected a pair in which hardly any changes occurred in the teacher's learning objectives during the negotiated assessment trajectory; a pair showing a gradual change; and a pair showing an abrupt change in learning objectives. As a written individual case report, we summarised the characteristics of the three assessment dialogues individually for each teacher (see Table 2 in the Results section).

Participants

In a previous study (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013), 27 teachers (23 female, 4 male) from three different nursing education institutes (School A, B and C) voluntarily participated in a negotiated assessment procedure. Nine of the teachers (one male and eight female) served as assessors for the other 18. For a detailed analysis of the assessment dialogues we intentionally selected one teacher-assessor pair from each school (Pope, Van Royen, and Baker 2002).

We selected teacher Sarah and assessor Charles from school A; teacher Howard and assessor Lizzy from school B; and teacher Giulia and assessor Linda from school C. Years of teaching experience of the teachers selected varied from 9 to 30, with an average of 17.3 years. See Table 1 for the further characteristics of the participants selected.

The negotiated assessment procedure

Prior to this study we developed and implemented a negotiated assessment procedure based on assessment literature in general and negotiated assessment literature in particular (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013). The procedure consisted of the following four elements: (1) a series of assessment meetings providing a setting for negotiation between assessor and assessee; (2) a specific competence framework as the starting point for the negotiated assessment procedure; (3) a learning contract describing the relevant learning objectives, activities, outcomes and evidence; and (4) the collected evidence provided by the teachers regarding their own learning and the skills to be assessed.

The competence framework provided an overview of the teaching needed to promote reflection skills in nursing students. We presented the framework as a source of inspiration for formulating personal learning objectives. The competence framework was developed in an earlier study (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013) on the basis of the opinions of teachers and other stakeholders such as students, health care professionals and scientists. For the purpose of developing the framework, various stakeholders were consulted and asked to express their opinions, concerns, and “lived experiences” regarding all kind of aspects that they considered important for reflection in the context of nursing education. This resulted in a competence framework which contained three main domains of teacher competence for promoting student reflection: (a) teaching the skills student need to be able to reflect; (b) creating a supportive classroom environment for students to reflect; and (c) functioning as a reflective professional (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013). The domains in the teaching competency framework reflect Hatton and Smith’s (1995) conceptualisation of reflection, which takes into account that learners usually go through a developmental sequence in the process of learning to reflect, starting as a beginner with a relatively simplistic reflection type, and working through different forms of reflection-on-action to the desired end point of a professional able to undertake reflection-in-action (Hatton and Smith 1995; Schön 1983). The framework also reflects literature where it acknowledges that reflection on professional practice can be difficult and that guidance and feedback are essential for developing reflective skills (Asselin 2011; Oosterbaan et al. 2010).

We organised three negotiation assessment meetings during a two-year trajectory. The first meeting took place at the beginning of the period; the second approximately one year later; and the third after about two years.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants at the start of negotiated assessment trajectory.

School	Name (fictitious)	Gender	Age	Years of teaching experience	Previous qualifications	Teaching duties
A	Teacher Sarah	F	58	12	RN + TE	Teacher of nursing subjects + mentor of group of students
	Assessor Charles	M	62	15	RN + TE	Teacher of nursing subjects + coordinator of work placement for nursing students
B	Teacher Howard	M	49	18	RN + TE	Teacher of nursing subjects
	Assessor Lizzy	F	48	9	RN + TE + coach training	Teacher of nursing subjects + coordinator of peer meetings among students
C	Teacher Giulia	F	51	20	Master's degree medicine + completion of teacher training course	Teacher of anatomy and physiology + involvement in projects on arithmetic and use of digital learning environment
	Assessor Linda	F	57	30	RN + TE + coach training	Teacher of nursing subjects

Note: RN = Registered Nurse; TE = Teacher Education qualification.

Table 2. Characteristics of the dialogues about teacher learning objectives and activities.

Assessment meeting	Teacher Howard assessor Lizzy	Teacher Sarah assessor Charles	Teacher Giulia assessor Linda
Assessment meeting 1	The assessor and teacher first talk about the motivation for participation in the trajectory	The assessor asks the teacher about her learning objectives. The teacher mentions them and the assessor agrees with them on the basis of the video material presented. The assessor then immediately notes something else	The assessor asks the teacher what she wants to start with. They first discuss the video recording and continue with the learning contract. The teacher explains her learning objectives (122 and further) and describes planned interventions (145 + 147)
	They then review the learning contract and the video clip provided as evidence for the learning objectives. The assessor takes the initiative to discuss the contract but leaves it to the teacher to decide what to do with it. The assessor compliments the teacher on the evidence provided for the learning objectives. She then describes what she thought was obvious behaviour and asks the teacher if he recognises it (232) and if he would like to take a closer look at it (238). At the end of the conversation, the teacher indicates that he thinks the assessor is directing too much	The assessor asks many questions but leaves it up to the teacher to decide on the exact learning objectives and activities. The teacher takes up the suggestion made by the assessor and adds it as a learning objective. She then formulates the accompanying learning activities herself	The assessor gives her opinion a couple of times on reflection for purposes of learning and on the lesson plan being used

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Assessment meeting	Teacher Howard assessor Lizzy	Teacher Sarah assessor Charles	Teacher Giulia assessor Linda
Assessment meeting 2	The learning objectives which have been worked on are discussed. It is evident that the teacher used the assessor's suggestions from meeting 1	The assessor gives the teacher an opportunity to reflect on her ideas and asks questions in order to find out what is behind these ideas	The teacher does not agree with the assessor's opinions right away and says that she first wants to read more about them (229+259). This restraint is also obvious when the assessor proposes watching the teacher's video clip (334–337) The teacher does not adjust the learning objectives in response to this conversation The learning objectives have been adjusted to the teacher's new teaching situation. The teacher and the assessor watch a recording of a lesson together. The assessor compliments the teacher a lot. The assessor asks in-depth questions, prompting the teacher to suggest improvements. These are added to the learning objectives
	The teacher reflects on the teaching situation depicted in the evidence. He raises specific points for discussion, and the assessor asks for more on these points, but also about the teacher's feelings	The teacher and the assessor both keep coming back to whether the teacher can let go of the students or not The assessor asks the teacher about the benefits of doing this (151) At first the teacher says that she did not learn much that was new. Later she mentions that she learned how to let go but that she nevertheless has a hard time doing so (176+178) The teacher maintains her learning objectives and adds something in response to the beginning of the interaction	
	In the end, the teacher adopts these two discussion points as new learning objectives Just as at the first meeting, the assessor and teacher evaluate the interaction		
Assessment meeting 3	The teacher says that he enjoyed the interaction		
Assessment meeting 3	The teacher indicates that looking back at the video he could see crucial moments where he was very strong, but also moments where he could have asked more in-depth questions (66). The teacher and assessor continue talking about the specific student in the video. The assessor gives suggestions about different ways for approaching the student but also indicates that the teacher himself must decide on what to do (235+257+317)	The assessor asks the teacher to reflect on the teaching situation described in the evidence. For example, he asks what objective the teacher had in mind	The teacher and the assessor evaluate the video. The assessor compliments the teacher and mentions examples of good interventions (43+107). The assessor continues asking "What are your intentions with that?" and gets the teacher to think

<p>The assessor indicates that she sees a lot of improvement (367). The teacher acknowledges this. The assessor reflects on whether the teacher should confront the student about his behaviour or not</p>	<p>The teacher mentions learning “not to think for the student” as a result of the NA procedure (22)</p>	<p>The whole NA process is then evaluated. The assessor asks “What do you think of it?” (115). The teacher admits that she has noticed the same passive attitude in herself as in her students (116). The NA process brought nothing new to her (118). “Yes, it confirms things I already knew” (156)</p>
<p>The assessor confirms that this is indeed a point for attention</p>	<p>The assessor mentions the learning objectives and asks the teacher to reflect on the past two years (53)</p>	<p>The teacher indicates that she is more aware but that she cannot see if there has been any real growth</p>
<p>This last meeting is also evaluated. The teacher compliments the assessor on her method of working. The assessor offers to continue giving feedback after the process is over (477). The teacher likes this (480) and offers to have the assessor share a video of herself for feedback from him (508)</p>	<p>The teacher mentions remembering not to think for the student during discussions with students (54). She notes that she [now] gets more out of the students. At the end of the meeting, the assessor reflects back on the influence of the NA process on the teacher (193). The assessor says that he has the idea that the contribution of the NA process is minor. In his opinion, the teacher thinks about her learning objectives once in a while, but most of the time forgets it. (197). The teacher does not agree with this, but indicates that she is still working on it (198)</p>	

Note: Exact quotations and contributions from teachers and assessors are indicated per assessment meeting with the number of the conversational turn (in parentheses). This provides a verifiable overview of the range of transcript material on which the analyses are based.

Prior to the first assessment meeting, the teachers produced a draft learning contract containing their proposed learning objectives and planned activities. To formulate their learning objectives teachers could use the teaching competence framework which was provided as a reference source and guideline. This framework was not presented as a pre-determined final attainment level, a fact explicitly communicated to the teachers and assessors during the training. The teacher handed the learning contract to the assessor before the first meeting, to be discussed during the meeting. Prior to the first assessment meeting, the teacher also handed in a videotaped teacher-student conversation, which the assessor viewed before the meeting.

In preparation for the second and third meetings the teachers completed a learner report which addressed the learning objectives agreed on at the previous meeting, and the learning activities undertaken to realise these objectives. During the subsequent meeting the teacher and assessor then discussed the learning objectives, the amount and type of evidence showing whether these had been reached, the relevant learning activities and their observed benefits plus the evolving perspectives of the teachers on the coaching of nursing students' reflection skills.

In-between the meetings the teachers undertook the proposed learning activities and collect evidence of progress from their own teaching practice. The teachers handed both the evidence collected and the learner report to the assessor before the next meeting, as input for discussion. During the meetings the teacher and assessor also discussed the feedback provided by the assessor.

Training

Before the start of the trajectory we organised a one-day training course conducted separately for the teachers and for the assessors. We gave both groups information about the negotiated assessment procedure, the preparation required for each assessment meeting and how to negotiate during the meetings (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2015).

We placed considerable emphasis on teacher agency, but instead of explicitly talking about the notion of agency and its meaning in a more theoretical sense, agency received only implicit attention in the training course: we showed the teachers and assessors what opportunities to negotiate looked like, and so provided teachers and assessors with a guideline for the formulation of the teacher learning objectives (i.e. the teaching competence framework) while emphasising the importance of having the teachers look critically at their own practices. The assessors were taught to provide support for the teachers by encouraging them to take responsibility for their own learning. They were also instructed to adopt alternative positions now and then in order to stimulate formative negotiation. We challenged the teachers to take responsibility for their own learning by stimulating them to put forward their own ideas about learning objectives and learning activities.

Learning objectives and learning activities

On the basis of the definition of agency as described in the theory section, teachers are expected to be active learners and formulate their own learning objectives, engage in learning activities and take the initiative for their learning during workplace practice.

We were able to formulate the teachers' learning objectives in terms of the three domains covered in the competence framework: (a) teaching the skills needed by students to reflect (e.g. "ask fewer closed questions", "give proper feedback"); (b) creating a supportive classroom

environment for students to reflect (e.g. “give compliments to a student”, “asking, describing and checking the students’ emotions”); and (c) functioning as a reflective professional (e.g. “increase knowledge of reflection”, “request feedback from students on teacher’s performance”) (Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013, 2015).

The teachers’ learning activities could be formulated to fit four possible categories: (a) experimentation (e.g. with different teacher interventions such as asking different types of questions); (b) reflection (e.g. becoming aware of their own teaching practice by watching videotaped lessons, or by reflecting and writing a report); (c) learning from others without interaction (e.g. reading relevant literature); and (d) learning from others with interaction (e.g. requesting and receiving feedback from students) (cf. Meirink, Meijer, and Verloop 2007; Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013).

Data collection

To answer our first research question, we asked questions concerning the teacher’s sense of agency during two interview sessions held halfway through the assessment trajectory and at the end of the trajectory. We did not mention the concept “agency” itself. Instead, we asked questions aimed at prompting the teachers to talk about agency-related experiences more implicitly. Examples of the questions are: “To what extent are you able to work on the learning objectives and activities which you as a teacher find important?” and “Do you see the framework of teacher competences as a straitjacket or as a frame for your own interpretations?”.

The interview sessions were audiotaped, the answers summarised, and characteristic expressions transcribed literally, to be used as data source.

During the last session the teachers were also asked to score statements about the negotiated assessment trajectory as a whole. Two of the statements concerned the perceived degree of teacher agency: “This procedure gave me the freedom to determine my own learning objectives in teaching reflection skills” and “This procedure gave me the freedom to decide what learning activities I wanted to undertake for my own professional development.” The items could be answered (on a 5-point Likert scale) as follows: (1) totally disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neither agree nor disagree, (4) agree or (5) totally agree.

We wanted to avoid the possibility of the assessment meeting being influenced by the presence of a researcher, so we asked the teachers to audiotape the assessment meetings. To answer our second research question (about how teacher agency manifested itself during the assessment meetings, if at all), the three meetings for each assessor-teacher dyad (i.e. a total of nine assessment meetings) were transcribed from audiotape for analysis.

Data analysis

Qualitative analyses of the summarised interview responses were conducted by the first author to determine the sense of agency reported by the teachers for the negotiated assessment procedure, and so find an answer to the first research question. For the purpose of data analysis the interviews were recorded, the answers summarised, and characteristic expressions transcribed verbatim.

The first step in the analysis of the interviews focused on understanding what the teachers had said during the interviews about their experiences of agency, and to identify “themes” (e.g. “formulating learning objectives”) by reading the interview transcripts thoroughly. Units

of analysis were defined by theme, i.e. a unit ended when a new theme was introduced; usually the complete answer to an interview question was one unit of analysis (e.g. a quotation). In our analysis, four essential themes in what the teachers talked about were identified: (a) formulating learning objectives; (b) using the competency framework; (c) self formulated learning activities; (d) the influence of the assessor. The coded responses were then discussed among the authors. Agreement on each coded response was easily reached by checking the original data. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the responses to the statements presented to the teachers in the interview sessions held at the end of the negotiated assessment procedure.

To answer the second research question, regarding the manifestation of teacher agency during the negotiate assessment trajectory, the 147 pages from the nine transcribed assessment dialogues were read and re-read by the first author at different times. The dialogues and separate conversational turns were then analysed in a number of additional rounds.

During the first round of analysis for the assessment meetings we addressed the way “learning objectives” and “learning activities” were mentioned by the teachers and assessors. When initially reading the transcripts we noted that learning objectives and learning activities could be referred to either explicitly or implicitly. We therefore took into account both ways while coding the data. An example of explicit reference is: “The learning objectives I have been working on are...”. An example of implicit reference is: “How do you plan to manage that next time you see this student?”. This first round of coding was checked by the second author.

In the second round of analyses of the assessment meetings we coded the transcripts with regard to the extent of agency operationalised as the teachers formulate their own learning objectives and activities, engage in the learning activities, and take the initiative in the interactions with the assessor during the assessment meetings. We were interested in how the learning objectives got shaped, and used the following types of questions to guide our coding of the transcripts and so trace the course of the negotiated assessment process and presence/absence of teacher agency:

Who mentioned the learning objective or learning activity first? How did the other person respond? What changes in learning objectives and activities were made as a result of participation in the meetings? What kinds of learning objectives and activities did the assessor suggest? How was the follow-up on the learning objectives and activities discussed at a meeting – for example, did the teacher adhere to the objectives?

The other authors checked this second round of coding after reading the complete transcripts, the interview results and the results regarding the implicit/explicit reference to learning objectives and activities during the assessment meetings. Only two discussion points arose, regarding less than 3% of the coded conversational turns. These concerned the initiative taken by the teacher to discuss the level of control being exerted by the assessor during an assessment meeting. Agreement was reached easily by going back to the original data (i.e. the transcripts).

Results

Teachers' sense of agency

During the two interview sessions held halfway through and at the end of the procedure, respectively, the teachers were asked “To what extent is it possible [in this procedure] to

work on learning objectives and activities which you as a teacher find important?”. All three teachers were of the opinion that they had enough opportunity to work on their own personal practices: depending on the circumstances, they were able to formulate their own learning objectives or accept the objectives suggested by the assessor. Teacher Giulia, for example, said: *It is really about my own learning objectives and we talk about that. The focus is on my learning process.*

Neither Howard nor Giulia saw the framework as a straitjacket. They had both formulated learning objectives based on their own teaching practices, and only later noticed that those learning objectives were in line with the competence framework. Teacher Sarah did not use the framework at all; she formulated learning objectives based upon her own teaching practices and did not check to see if those objectives fit into the competence framework or not.

During the first interview Sarah also made a remark which clearly illustrates her sense of agency: *The assessor may have said something and I may have been listening, and perhaps I tried to use it, but the final decision to do it or not was still mine. That was a deliberate decision.*

Two of the statements presented to the teachers at the end of the negotiated assessment trajectory also pertained to their perceived sense of agency:

This procedure gave me the freedom to determine my own learning objectives related to encouraging reflection on the part of nursing students and This procedure gave me the freedom to decide what learning activities I wanted to undertake for my own professional development.

The teachers clearly agreed with both statements; on a scale of 1–5, the first statement had an average score of 4.7, the second of 4.0.

Manifestations of teacher agency during assessment meetings

We next explored the manifestation of teacher agency during the negotiated assessment meetings. We did this in terms of the learning objectives and activities formulated and discussed by the teachers at each meeting, the extent of teachers' involvement in their own learning processes, and the degree of initiative during the assessment interactions.

In Table 2 the characteristics of the three assessment dialogues are summarised individually for each teacher. The manifestations of agency shown in Table 2 will be discussed and illustrated below in terms of the definition (or elements of it) of agency used in the context of this study.

Although the assessment trajectories were organised similarly (i.e. a learning contract, learner reports, evidence and three assessment meetings), the manifestation of teacher agency varied considerably across teachers, as might be expected on the basis of our deliberate selection of the teachers on the basis of no, minimal or major changes in their learning objectives. The differences in the manifestation of agency were reflected visible in the extent to which the teachers took control and showed initiative during the assessment meetings. Sarah's assessor mainly asked questions and left Sarah to decide what to do next. Howard's assessor provided feedback and made suggestions which Howard mostly agreed with. Giulia's assessor provided both suggestions and feedback, but Giulia did not heed them; she did not modify her learning objectives on the basis of the assessment meetings, but rather on the basis of her own changed teaching practices. To provide greater insight into the

manifestation of teacher agency during the negotiated assessment meetings, we will discuss the examples of Sarah, Howard and Giulia in more detail.

Sarah

In the first meeting, assessor Charles invites Sarah to tell him about her learning objectives. Sarah tells her assessor about what she thinks is going well and what is going not so well. The assessor confirms this and takes the initiative to add another point, which he says can be seen on the videotaped teacher–student conversation viewed before the meeting. The point concerns the way in which Sarah questions students and relates to the primary teaching domain of the competence framework (i.e. teaching the skills needed for students to reflect). The assessor then spends considerable time asking Sarah what she thinks about her learning objectives and her teaching practices in this regard. Sarah answers at length; frequently, while responding to a question, she changes the topic. At the end of the meeting, the assessor asks Sarah which learning objectives she would like to focus on in response to what has been discussed during the meeting, and so gives the teacher the opportunity to reformulate her learning objectives. Sarah's reply is that in addition to her own learning objective of more carefully guiding the student, she would like to add the assessor's point about changing her way of questioning her learning objectives.

In the second meeting it is clear that Sarah has stuck to the learning objectives mentioned at the first meeting, but she mentions one objective regarding which she does not know whether she has managed to change her behaviour, or is even capable of changing, because of her strong habit of acting in a way incompatible with that objective. In the subsequent interaction, the assessor's questions are about a different objective, which suggests that the assessor agrees with Sarah's comments about the power of a habitual way of acting. The assessor asks Sarah what she wants with regard to the learning objectives mentioned and, at the end of the second meeting, takes the initiative and repeats this answer together with the suggestion that Sarah adapt the relevant learning objective. Sarah agrees with this.

In Sarah's meetings we see how the assessor provides the teacher with opportunities to take the initiative with regard to her own learning by asking open questions (e.g. *What would you like to see happen? What do you need to be able to work this out?*). The assessor certainly offers an opinion every now and then, but his approach is to generally encourage the teacher to talk about her own ideas. Moreover, the assessment meetings show that the teacher takes every opportunity provided by the assessor to do this, moreover. She nevertheless frequently drifts away from the topic, which appears to be her way of getting to discuss topics which are clearly important to her.

Howard

In the first negotiated assessment meeting, assessor Lizzy takes the initiative to encourage Howard to adjust some of the learning objectives presented in his learning contract. She does this by offering comments such as: *I can imagine that you consider this a separate learning objective* (64) and *So that is the reason I am saying: What would it be like to have this as a separate objective?* (68). The learning objective at issue belongs in the primary teaching domain of the competence framework, and concerns the teaching of skills students need to reflect. Discussing the videotaped examples of the teacher's teaching practices, the assessor again takes the initiative and suggests several learning objectives pertaining to different domains of competence, learning and activities. At first, Howard agrees with some of the suggestions

but not with others. At the end of the meeting, Lizzy again takes the initiative for an evaluation by asking Howard about his experiences. He mentions that he has experienced the assessor as overly leading and pushy, and suggests that guiding is fine in this phase of the process but that there should be less of it during the next phase: *Otherwise I get the feeling that you are taking responsibility for my learning contract; no, at some point that's up to me* (317). With this remark, the teacher clearly points to his own responsibility for his learning process.

During the second meeting it turns out that Howard has accepted all of the suggestions made by the assessor during the first meeting. The assessor has also listened to Howard's feedback and is therefore less directing at the second meeting. Howard mentions two points for his further learning. The assessor confirms these and then asks questions to make sure she fully understands the reasons for the additional points. Howard adapts his learning objectives on the basis of this meeting, and in the third meeting it is clear that he has stuck to his adapted objectives.

In Howard's assessment meetings we clearly see that the kind of questions and statements posed by the assessor can determine the extent to which the teacher shows or is allowed to show initiative. When the assessor asks fewer questions and makes more statements, the teacher is guided in a specific direction and can really only agree or disagree with the statements. When the assessor offers more, and largely open, questions rather than statements the teacher is able to take more initiative during the assessment meetings. Teacher Howard does not agree with all the assessor's suggestions and states so clearly. The assessor indicates that the teacher himself should decide whether to adapt a learning objective or not. In the end, Howard accepts most of the assessor's recommendations, but it is not clear whether or not he took control and fully adopted the suggestions. However, the fact that by the third session the learning objectives had been reached suggests that the teacher was fully behind the suggestions made by the assessor.

Giulia

Assessor Linda offers Giulia lots of opportunities to take the initiative and responsibility for her own learning process, for example by suggesting something to Giulia twice but in different ways. On the first occasion, Linda is quite explicit about her own opinion on reflection for the purpose of learning. On the second occasion, she is more cautious in her suggestion of a specific teacher learning activity: she proposes that in the next assessment meeting they watch Giulia's videotaped lesson together. Giulia does not respond to the assessor's opinion or suggestion on either occasion (227 + 229, 335 + 337 + 339). At the second assessment meeting, however, it becomes clear that Giulia has accepted the suggestion: they watch the video together.

In this second meeting it turns out that Giulia has taken the initiative to change all her learning objectives, due to changes in her own teaching practices. The assessor agrees with the new learning objectives, asks the teacher about the related teacher learning activities, and suggests an additional activity for "learning from others in interaction". In the third meeting it is not clear whether or not the teacher has acted on this suggestion; she mentions her own lack of initiative regarding her own learning during the negotiated assessment process, and compares her behaviour to that of her students.

In Giulia's assessment meetings we see that the assessor takes very little initiative during the meetings. She agrees with almost everything the teacher has to say or wants to do; she

offers her perspective on several occasions, but the teacher does not explicitly respond to this. Teacher Giulia clearly takes the initiative in reformulating her learning objectives and activities, and does not change any of her learning objectives on the basis of the assessment meetings. We see only one change of learning activity initiated by the assessor during the assessment meetings: watching a videotaped teacher-student conversation together.

Conclusions and discussion

In this study, we examined teacher agency within the context of a negotiated assessment procedure. As mentioned before, several definitions and operationalisations of the concept agency are available. In line with the literature discussed in the first sections, we assumed that agency would manifest itself in two main ways: (a) as a sense of having control over one's own actions and (b) in the extent to which teachers formulate their own learning objectives and activities, engage in learning activities, and take the initiative during the assessment and learning process (Day et al. 2007; Earl 1987; Metcalfe and Greene 2007). By focusing on the latter perspective we hoped to add new knowledge to the literature about agency.

All three teachers selected for inclusion in this in-depth study reported a strong sense of agency during the negotiated assessment trajectory. According to the teachers the focus of the trajectory was indeed on their own teaching practices, their own learning objectives, their own learning activities, and their own choices with regard to all these.

As mentioned in our introduction section, for the purpose of promoting reflective dialogues that foster teachers' learning and development, in negotiated assessment processes those being assessed are encouraged to take the initiative in their own learning, also by negotiating the interpretation of feedback provided (Anderson, Boud, and Sampson 1996; Verberg, Tigelaar, and Verloop 2013). With regard to the extent to which the teachers actually took the initiative and were actively involved in their own learning during the negotiated assessment trajectory, the results clearly varied, as might be expected because of our selective sampling procedure. For example, when questions from the assessors offered the teachers an opportunity to take the initiative some responded and some did not. The visibility of the agency demonstrated by the teachers during the assessment meetings also fluctuated. In the example of assessor Lizzy and teacher Howard, the assessor took the initiative during the first meeting by offering a challenge which gave Howard an opportunity to stand up for his point of view and disagree, but he did not do either. In our data disagreements were not always visible or obvious.

Our finding that the teachers experienced a high degree of agency, which nevertheless did not consistently manifest itself during the actual negotiated assessment process, may appear contradictory but a viable explanation can be found in our findings and our definition of teacher agency. Our inquiry into the teacher's sense of agency did not refer to specific elements, but rather to the assessment experience as a whole. Thus, we seem to have measured the teacher's disposition throughout the two-year assessment trajectory. In contrast, our inquiry into the manifestations of agency focused on specific elements of the assessment meetings, so that in this way we measured the teachers' actual behaviour as opposed to subjective dispositions.

A limitation of this study is the fact that we only looked for the visibility of agency during the assessment meetings. On the basis of our operationalisation of agency (see above), we

focused on the individual teacher and the interactions between teacher and assessor, and did not take into account the broader social context such as school culture. This broader context may also affect the way teachers are able to exhibit agency and interpret and handle the demands of daily practice (Edwards 2015). It is also possible that teachers' agency had taken place elsewhere and was therefore not manifest in the context of the assessment meetings. It is conceivable, for example, that teacher and assessor discussed potential learning objectives after an assessment meeting. In future research this possibility should be considered. However, because of our focus on work place learning through teacher-formulated learning activities, we considered the assessment meetings themselves the primary source for our research question.

During the training sessions, considerable emphasis was placed on stimulating teacher agency by supplying the teaching competence framework as a guideline for the formulation of relevant learning objectives and highlighting possible opportunities to negotiate. We emphasised that the competence framework was only a broad outline, so as to leave plenty of room for formulating personal learning objectives and discussing these, along with the proposed learning activities, with the assessor.

We also emphasised the importance of paying attention to the teachers' own teaching practices. Apparently, *knowing* that you will be given an opportunity – among other things – to negotiate your assessment and so accept or reject the assessor's input and feedback, in addition to choosing whether or not to use the teacher competence framework, is sufficient to foster a sense of teacher agency. Although in the training course we did not explicitly talk about the notion of agency, the questions we did ask may have influenced the results, because we asked the teachers to talk about the extent to which they felt they had been able to pursue the learning goals they considered important, and the extent to which the characteristics of the negotiated assessment procedure had been helpful in that respect. Our interview questions did not address the extent to which the teachers experienced agency during the assessment dialogues. Indeed, the teachers' marked sense of agency appeared to be closely connected to the way a negotiated assessment procedure is conducted, but we do not know which elements of the procedure contributed to this, or to the manifestations of agency (or no agency). For example, when an assessor suggested an additional learning objective we could not always determine on the basis of the recorded interactions if the teacher had blindly accepted (or rejected) the suggestion or given it careful consideration before accepting (or rejecting) it. Additional information is needed to get a clearer picture of the effects of a negotiated assessment process on teachers and of their motives for changing (or not changing). It is quite conceivable that the personal styles of some individuals require more time, information, privacy, reflection, etc. to make decisions. This appeared to be the case for both Howard and Giulia, who did not explicitly agree with the suggestions offered by their assessors but were nevertheless later found to have implemented them. A reason for this may be that teachers' reasons and rationales for agreeing or disagreeing, and changing or not changing, remain mostly tacit and embedded in teachers' actions and are difficult to articulate (Schön 1983). In future research interviewing the teachers after an assessment meeting could be an option. For this purpose methodological approaches could be applied that can more directly tap into the tacit knowledge teachers use during reflective dialogues in assessment meetings. In this respect, we recommend *stimulated recall interviews* with both the teacher and the assessor following an assessment meeting. Such interviews can provide greater insight into what happens during an

assessment meeting, what formal and informal aspects of the assessment procedure appear to be critical, and how these different aspects of the negotiated assessment procedure are perceived by the participants and affect them. The advantage of such an approach compared to the approach we followed in this study is that this enables more direct measuring of the teachers' thought processes during the reflective dialogues as they actually occurred. In the analyses of the stimulated recall interviews Schön's (1983) notion of reflection-in-action may be taken into account, focusing on prompting the teachers for their actions undertaken during the reflective dialogues, to talk about the rationales and the alternative perspectives, claims and pathways towards a solution they considered during the reflective dialogue. In addition, the analyses of recorded reflective dialogues during negotiated assessment processes may be expanded in order to shed additional light on the power relations in negotiated assessment processes. As described in our introduction section, more equal power relations in assessment meetings seem promising for the advancement of teacher agency and teacher learning (Anderson, Boud, and Sampson 1996). Although our data did indeed provide insight into the power relations between teachers and their assessors in terms of the teachers' active involvement and initiatives by teachers themselves during negotiated assessment procedures, our analysis did not focus on power relations in terms of open communication and mutual respect. Including coding perspectives such as tone and phrasing, and using member checks at different moments in the data analysis processes, may lead to a further understanding of power relations during negotiated assessment processes.

A plausible hypothesis generated by our findings is that it is not so much the actions of the teachers during the negotiated assessment process which foster a greater sense of agency, but rather the *expectation* and *knowledge* that they must actively determine, help evaluate and adjust their learning objectives and activities when needed. This relates to Schön's (1983) and Hatton and Smith's (1995) consideration that ultimately reflective processes are expected to support teachers in improving their teaching practices and developing the capacity to direct their own development. The relevancy of agency in this respect may not be as much about participation in the actual assessment procedure and showing initiative as it is about feeling responsible for and hence in control of one's own learning and assessment (cf. Hargreaves, Earl, and Schmidt 2002; Samaras and Gismondi 1998). Only further research will show whether this is the case or not.

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